



Pioneers in European Ethnobiology

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My friends and collaborators on our *Ethnobiology* textbook, Ingvar Svanberg and Łukasz Łuczaj, sent me this wonderful book, and I hereby alert ethnobiologists to its value and importance. It introduces us to a wonderful but often neglected world of ethnobiologists and precursors thereof. Chapters cover Spain, Russia (several on early explorers), Slovakia, Hungary, Estonia (two chapters!), Italy, and other areas, with a chapter on early women ethnobiologists of the world (not just Europe). How many of us knew there were first-rate ethnobiologists in Estonia? The chapter on women is particularly interesting in showing how many early and excellent researchers were female, in spite of the facile stereotype that early ethnography was a white male preserve. Sadly, the champions of women's position have often had just as much vested interest in maintaining this myth as the champions of male privilege. To maintain an exaggerated story of discrimination, the very real presence of women has been written out of the record. (Just to add a tidbit to that record, one of the women mentioned, Matilda Coxe Stephenson, co-founded the Women's Anthropological Society of America, in 1885.)

The early European ethnobiologists, and their forebears among explorers interested in plants and animals, include some fascinating and wondrous characters. There was Nicholas Monardes, stuck in his business in 16th century Sevilla while others got to explore the New World, but constantly grilling every returning captain and merchant on what new plants and medicines they had found. There was Georg Steller, remembered in Steller's Jay, Steller's Sea Lion, and so on—a fiery, independent soul, champion of Indigenous rights, dead at a very young age (as too many early figures were). Later, once ethnobiology was a “thing,” Bela Gunda practically wrote the book on Hungarian and Hungarophone ethnobiology; I

knew his work on fish and fishing but nothing more about him, since his writings are largely in Hungarian and many unpublished. There was the Estonian Mart Mäger, whom I would dearly love to have met and worked with in far northeast Europe.

In short, this book is not only incredibly rich in detail, but the detail is fascinating, with most of it concerning quite unique and irreplaceable characters who saved vast amounts of knowledge that would otherwise be lost.

My one criticism is that no distinction is drawn between ethnobiology and just listing plant and animal names. There is a difference. Ethnobiology involves learning traditional and folk sciences as *systems*, with their own logic, order, representation systems, taxonomies, taxonomic principles, and theories. Most of the pre-1950 scholars in this book, and some of the post-1950 ones, merely listed local plant and animal names with dictionary equivalents in learned languages. That can be a fine and valuable thing to do, but it isn't ethnobiology. There were some stunning exceptions. The most amazing is Bernardino de Sahagún, who in Mexico in the 16th century, with a team of Aztec/Mexica students, created modern ethnology (including ethnobiology) pretty much from scratch. Steller did a pretty fair job too; he understood. Many early 20th century scholars were transitional, and then with leaders like Gunda and Mäger we have full-blown ethnobiology. This is a distinction worth making, and discussing, if only because it is thought-provoking that people like Sahagún (and, to go back even earlier, Theophrastus and Dioscorides) could independently come up with a pretty good idea of what in future became a whole science in itself. I am unable to tell from the book's discussions of people I don't know about—the Polish and early Italian writers, for instance—if they were



true ethnobiologists in the modern sense or just recorders of local lore. I would like to know. Did any of them have a sense of inclusive folk sciences?

We need more of this sort of intensive history. Ibn Battuta, Avicenna and Maimonides in the Middle Eastern tradition deserve very serious consideration, for instance. So does Li Shizhen, author of China's

standard traditional herbal, the *Bencao Gangmu*, published in 1593. So do many others. This book should stimulate research. Meanwhile, it is an invaluable guide to unpublished and published but hard-to-find resources in Europe's far too-little appreciated naturalist and ethnoscientist traditions. The price is high; at least get your university library to buy it.